

Dental funding a must

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The last time I checked, my teeth were part of my body. And so providing basic and emergency dental care for Torontonians in need should remain part of city-funded public health services.

The Budget Committee's recent directive to cut an additional \$5.5 million from the Board of Health is a direct threat to the future of the dental health program and must be rejected.

Healthy teeth and gums are integral to good health. Diseased teeth and gums can cause pain, suffering, illness and even death.

However, the Canada Health Act covers only medical and hospital care. Millions of Canadians who can't afford private dental insurance or who can't afford dentists' fees are at risk for serious complications of untreated dental problems.

Despite fluoridated water, surveys still find that more than 50 per cent of children will experience dental decay by the age of 13. Approximately 20 per cent of children experience 80 per cent of the decay.

In Toronto, children born outside Canada or to recent immigrants, and children in low-income families are most likely to be affected. Most of the parents of these children work in jobs that don't provide dental benefits.

But the problem isn't limited to vulnerable children: Surveys reveal that 48 per cent of institutionalized seniors did not have teeth, 42 per cent of low-income seniors have lost all their teeth, and many seniors had dentures that were dirty or fit poorly.

The province of Ontario does not fund or mandate the provision of basic dental care for all its citizens. Rather, boards of health in Ontario are required by law only to ensure adequate fluoridation and to refer children

who meet the criteria for the Child In Need of Treatment (CINOT) program.

Essentially, CINOT covers only dependent children of Ontario Works and Ontario Disability recipients.

Dental care is, in fact, a good example of what two-tiered medical care would feel like. Terrible inequities result and vulnerable people suffer needlessly.

Adults who benefit from the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Program are entitled to emergency dental care which is cost-shared with the city. Their dependent children, aged up to age 17, are eligible for basic dental care. Everyone else is on their own, which means that 70 per cent of seniors have no dental insurance at all.

The citizens of amalgamated Toronto have a history of funding public dental services. North York held a referendum in 1938 in which a majority of taxpayers voted to support the provision of dental services.

Since 1913, residents of the former City of Toronto have provided dental care through tax dollars. Eleven community clinics and more than 75 in-school services serve 21,000 low income children, 9,000 seniors every year, and over 500 high-risk pregnant women.

Councillor Joe Mihevc, chair of the Board of Health, recalls being the child of immigrant parents and not having dental care until his father was able to get dental benefits as a result of his union's negotiations.

It's my story too.

Until governments find the will to include dental benefits in the Canada Health Act, Toronto citizens should be proud to provide such an essential service.